Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Watchmen, Copaganda, and Abolition Futurities in US Television

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ABSTRACT Through this article, we examine the history and conventions of copaganda in the United States, and critically consider how HBO's *Watchmen* has responded to and represented the historical relationship between policing and white supremacy. We argue that while *Watchmen* works to explicitly critique the history of white supremacist violence in US policing, the show reproduces several copaganda conventions. *Watchmen* depicts central law enforcement characters who commit violence as heroes, uplifts the main police character as an eventually almighty arbiter of justice, portrays white supremacist law enforcement characters as anomalous individual infiltrators (a.k.a. "bad apples"), and was created in collaboration with various members of law enforcement. After presenting this case study in contemporary copaganda, we consider how science fiction series can more meaningfully respond to the movement for police and prison abolition through representing abolitionist futures.

KEYWORDS police, television, science fiction, abolition, film, copaganda

Introduction

During the summer of 2020, as an estimated fifteen to twenty-six million people in the United States participated in protests demanding justice for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and Ahmaud Arbery,[1] numerous subscription-based streaming platforms publicly declared that they were making content "highlighting stories by Black artists and/or about Black characters" freely available to their audiences.[2] Among them, Home Box Office (HBO) made its award-winning limited series *Watchmen* free to stream during the weekend of Juneteenth.[3]

Based on Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' award-winning 1986–87 graphic novel, HBO's *Watchmen* is set in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where the central character, Detective Angela Abar, and her law enforcement colleagues are confronted with the return of a white supremacist vigilante group called the Seventh Kavalry. The series, which premiered in 2019, received

significant critical acclaim, earning eleven Emmys, four Television Critics Association awards, a Peabody Award, a Writer's Guild of America award, and a Gotham Independent Film Award. *Watchmen* was also widely praised for its portrayals of policing and racism in the US,[4] and its efforts to "explor[e] the legacy of systemic racism in America."[5] However, the series was also questioned and critiqued for those portrayals and their potential embodiment of "copaganda"—content that encourages audiences to see policing and police violence as fair, noble, and necessary.[6]

Through this article, we examine the history and conventions of copaganda in the US, and critically consider how HBO's *Watchmen* has responded to and represented the historical relationship between policing and white supremacy.[7] As Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton demonstrate, white supremacy is maintained through the gratuitous "repetition of violence as standard operating (police) procedure."[8] This repetition is due to the inherent instability of white supremacy, which requires a constant paranoia of loss and the resulting constant reinvention of whiteness via state absorption and co-option.[9] We argue that while *Watchmen* highlights the historical relationship between white supremacy and US policing, it ultimately reproduces copaganda conventions through depicting central law enforcement characters who commit violence as heroes, uplifting the main police character as an eventually almighty arbiter of justice, and portraying white supremacist law enforcement characters as anomalous individual infiltrators (a.k.a. "bad apples"). Subsequently, we consider how science fiction series can more meaningfully respond to the Movement for Black Lives through representing abolitionist futures.

Copaganda

The origins of the term "copaganda" (a portmanteau of "cop" and "propaganda") are unclear. At present, the word appears to have been first used by Greg Beato, who wrote in 2003 that "mostly Hollywood has simply churned out malignant copaganda that glamorizes police brutality and normalizes the idea that the only good cop is a bad cop."[10] The concept has since been increasingly used to describe media content that "actively counters attempts to hold police malfeasance accountable by reinforcing the ideas that the police are generally fair and hard-working and that Black criminals deserve the brutal treatment they receive."[11] Copaganda thus refers to both fictional media that normalizes the power, presence, and violent practices of the police, and to the media produced by police forces themselves[12]—including the recent rise in police departments' utilization of social media in an attempt "to *manage* policing's visibility,"[13] and non-fiction, as shown in Hall et al.'s *Policing the Crisis*.[14] And copaganda involves both on-screen representations—depictions of policing—and behind-the-scenes processes—via the people, organizations, and power dynamics shaping why and how stories about policing are told.

In understanding how narratives of policing are told, we must understand how policing functions. As Micol Seigel discusses in *Violence Work*, the police act as "violence workers" and "the human-scale expression of the state."[15] The state holds a monopoly over violence, and the police "make real" that monopoly.[16] The police also maintain racial capitalism through their state-sanctioned responsibilities, which include the following: "protect the property of the capitalist class; maintain stable conditions for capital accumulation; and defend against any threats to these unequal conditions of rule."[17]

The police are legitimized by the state through what Correia and Wall name "copspeak", defined as "a language that limits our ability to understand police as anything other than essential."[18] In rendering police as essential, they are constructed as the "thin blue line" between order and savagery; thus, we are taught that "a life worth living, is impossible without police."[19] Correia and Wall accordingly argue that not only are the police a reproduction of legitimized state violence, but they are also "a political idea" and "a product of sociohistorical forces."[20] Thus, when copaganda normalizes the power, presence, and violent practices of the police, it normalizes the state's monopoly over violence and maintains the social order of racial capitalism.

In this article, we focus on fictional copaganda, a significant source of public engagement with policing. As Lovell argues in *Good Cop, Bad Cop: Mass Media and the Cycle of Police Reform*, "it is through mass media that the public most often interacts with its community officials."[21] And in the United States, such interactions predominantly involve fictional police characters; law-enforcement dramas have historically been "the single most popular form of television entertainment," to the extent that "in a given week of prime-time viewing, the typical audience member will watch 30 police officers, 7 lawyers and 3 judges but only 1 scientist or engineer and only a small number of blue-collar workers."[22] As Christopher P. Wilson discusses in *Cop Knowledge: Police Power and Cultural Narrative in Twentieth-Century America,* police work is considered "the most overrepresented profession in prime-time television."[23]

These repetitive representations can, and should, be understood as part of what Loïc Wacquant names "law-and-order pornography."[24] Wacquant describes law-and-order pornography as the orchestration, exaggeration, dramatization, and ritualization of "deeds proclaiming to fight crime and assorted urban disorders," that much like pornographic movies "are extraordinarily repetitive, mechanical, uniform, and therefore eminently predictable."[25] Wacquant argues that the spectacle provided by law-and-order pornography proves that Foucault was wrong when he argued that punishment would disappear from public view. Instead "a veritable industry trading on representations of offenders and law-enforcement has sprung forth and spread."[26] Law-and-order pornography then reflects a repetitive cultural production of law-and-order representations

that “dramatize moral norms” and normalize “society’s revenge against the social misfits onto whom displaced societal anxiety fastens” reproducing the belief that the police and our current law-and-order system are needed.[27]

Thus, while copaganda is specific to the portrayal of police, it is part of a broader investment in not only normalizing but naturalizing our current justice system. Copaganda encourages audiences to empathize with law enforcement and with the ideology that policing and police violence are necessary.[28] Importantly, however, this isn’t true for all audiences. As Howard Bryant writes,“the image of the police divides almost exclusively along racial and class lines. The white mainstream accepts an image of benevolence, fairness, and *justice*,” while primarily Black and Brown communities, who have experienced over-policing their whole lives “know firsthand that the police are *possibly* all of those things but also *definitely* can be brutal, oppressive, merciless, aggressive, and extralegal.”[29] Bryant thus highlights the need for scholars to examine the politics of representation of policing in US popular media.

As Stuart Hall describes in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, the politics of representation involve “how language and representation produce meaning” and “how the knowledge which a particular discourse produces connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practised and studied”; thus, requiring us to look at “the way representational practices operate in concrete historical situations, in actual practice.”[30] Accordingly, in this article, we situate HBO’s *Watchmen* within the broader history of US copaganda production as we examine the show’s depictions of policing and consider the contextual factors that shaped those representations.

Copaganda Production in the US

The US film and television industries and police have a long history of working together to normalize police power. In the early twentieth century, before film—as a form of expression—became protected under freedom of speech (Burstyn v. Wilson, 1952), police departments and organizations used state power to control media circulation and consumption via public censure and censorship.[31] Police organizations also directly influenced—and continue to shape—cinematic portrayals of policing through collaborations with filmmakers and studios.

For example, *Dragnet* (1951–1959)—considered the originator of the modern “cop show”—was created in partnership with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). The show’s creator, Jack Webb, agreed that all *Dragnet* scripts would be approved by the LAPD’s

Public Information Division in exchange for story ideas, financial support, and the freedom to shoot footage anywhere in the city.[32] Additionally, LAPD officers served as extras and their vehicles were used as props. This approval agreement granted the LAPD substantial power over *Dragnet's* depictions; "the comments weren't advisory: If the department objected to something . . . the entire episode might be scrapped."[33] This agreement set a precedent for future productions of fictional cop shows in partnership with real police. For example, *Highway Patrol*, which aired from 1955–59, was created in response to California Highway Patrol (CHP) commissioner Bernard Caldwell demanding that the CHP's public relations department "get us a show like *Dragnet*."[34] And today, police maintain close ties with Hollywood through consulting on, acting in, and reviewing materials for films and television shows that portray law enforcement. Police also retain a "routine presence on film and TV sets shot on location" as security forces monitoring sets, controlling crowds, and directing traffic.[35]

Dragnet's representational practices also set the scene for the contemporary cop genre. The show modeled several central copaganda conventions, such as perpetuating the "bad apple" narrative. As *Dragnet's* protagonist, Sergeant Friday, plainly stated in the series' third season, "police brutality, that's another story, we try to prevent it in the first place by not hiring brutal men . . . occasionally a bad apple slips through or a good apple turns bad. Well, my friend, you don't want him on the job and the department doesn't want him either."[36] *Dragnet* also erased the relationship between policing and white supremacy, often by representing a more racially and gender diverse police force. *Dragnet* depicted Black and Latine LAPD officers, but the real LAPD was segregated when it was produced. Other defining features of copaganda include over-representing the narratively and aesthetically "exciting" elements of policing; centering and humanizing the police rather than the victims of crime or those criminalized by the police; erasing the effects of policing on a broader community; and celebrating and naturalizing the use of extralegal violence by police as justified. Through this article, we consider if and how HBO's *Watchmen* employs these conventions.

Watchmen: A Case Study in Contemporary Copaganda

To analyze *Watchmen's* portrayals of policing and potential reproduction of copaganda conventions, we examined the show's content and context. For the former, we employed four stages of qualitative data collection and analysis. First, we independently conducted thematic analyses of the first season of *Watchmen*—observing and taking detailed notes on each episode. Through these notes, we recorded our observations of a) the show's depictions of law enforcement characters (e.g., their actions, appearances, and

relationships with other characters); b) notable plot points; c) salient quotes from characters' discussions around policing, justice, and white supremacy; and d) depictions of violence and vigilantism. We then combined and collaboratively analyzed our notes, identifying key themes and exploring how discourses around policing, racial politics, and state-sanctioned and vigilante violence play out in each episode and the series as a whole. To explore the contextual factors shaping this content, we engaged with publicly available sources (e.g., The Official *Watchmen* Podcast, interviews with *Watchmen* creators, IMDb).

Using these methods, we found that *Watchmen* takes up the questions of morality, identity, and power explored in Alan Moore's (1986) original DC Comics series to explore the present, lived, masked realities of white supremacist violence. However, while HBO's *Watchmen* works to explicitly critique the history of white supremacist violence in US policing, it ultimately reproduces several copaganda conventions in its content and creation.

The first episode of HBO's *Watchmen* sets up a narrative of a police department that appears to understand the concept of white supremacy, experiences the violence that it breeds, and actively aims to eradicate it. The show opens with a dramatization of the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 before the audience is transported to a fictional "present day" (2019) Tulsa, Oklahoma, in which a Black police officer is shot by a member of a white supremacist organization known as the Seventh Kavalry. The audience is subsequently introduced to Detective Angela Abar—a Black officer who is one of few survivors of a prior act of Seventh Kavalary violence—an organized attack targeting forty Tulsa cops on Christmas Eve. The attack referred to as the "White Night," catalyzed the creation and passage of the Defense of Police Act (DOPA), which allows police officers to conceal their identities (e.g., cover their faces using masks) while on duty.

Throughout the first episode, masked police officers hunt down and brutalize possible white supremacists. And the episode ends with the lynching of Tulsa's white Chief of Police, Judd Crawford—an act that appears, on the surface, to stem from his affiliation with the police department; in the final shot, the camera pans to frame his fallen, blood-stained badge. The first episode thus positions policing and white supremacy as working against each other, with policing presented as a solution to white supremacy. However, the series quickly subverts this narrative by highlighting the historical ties between policing, politics, and white supremacy. Detective Abar discovers a Ku Klux Klan robe with a golden police badge affixed to its chest in a secret compartment in Chief Crawford's wardrobe in the second episode. At this moment, the show's narrative of white supremacy begins to address the institutionalization of white supremacy via the police.

This history is further explored through the newly discovered relationship between Detective Abar, a present-day police officer in Tulsa, and her grandfather William (Will)

Reeves, a former New York City police officer from the 1930s to the 1950s. In the Emmy-award-winning episode six, “This Extraordinary Being,” Detective Abar gains access to her grandfather’s memories. In these memories, we discover that as acop in New York City, Will was repeatedly seen as disrupting or defying standard policing operating procedures for not adhering to white supremacist norms (e.g., questioning his colleagues’ decision to release the perpetrator of an anti-semitic attack). In response, those colleagues captured him, dragged him to a tree, put a hood over his head and a noose around his neck, and strung him up to be lynched. However, at the last minute, Will’s colleagues release him and issue him a warning: “keep your Black nose out of white folks’ business.”[37]. Later in the episode, Reeves comes across a Klan meeting at the back of a grocery store in Queens and a Klan storage space at a meatpacking warehouse, where he runs into some of his police officer colleagues.

In these scenes, art reflects reality, as there has long been historical evidence of members of white supremacists organizations infiltrating law enforcement.[38] Additionally, through Will’s memories, including his discovery that his cop colleagues were members of the KKK and his experience surviving the 1921 Tulsa race riots, audiences are presented with the banality of the Klan’s presence throughout the country. Throughout Will’s life stages, he encounters their violence and widespread presence and power.

This banality is further depicted in the series’ present-day timeline, in which audiences are introduced to the Seventh Kavalry. The fictional Seventh Kavalry was named after the non-fictional Seventh Cavalry Regiment, who are most well known for their role in the genocide of Indigenous peoples in the United States via the “American Indian Wars” enacted by the US nation-state. Director and executive producer Nicole Kassell describes the Seventh Kavalry as “a terrorist cell” wearing the mask of Rorschach (Walter Joseph Kovacs) from the original 1986 Watchmen graphic novel, who the creator Alan Moore described as “an extremely right-wing character.”[39] Throughout *Watchmen*, key characters with access to power are revealed to be members of the Seventh Kavalry (including Chief of Police Judd Crawford, his wife, and Senator Joe Keene), reflecting reality by highlighting the ties between white supremacist organizations, politics, and policing.

Despite these critiques of white supremacy and the historical ties between policing and white supremacist organizations, *Watchmen* ultimately reproduces copaganda conventions and fails to show policing as a structurally white supremacist organization. Through portraying central police characters who commit violence as heroes, uplifting the main cop character as an eventually almighty arbiter of justice, and portraying the Seventh Kavalry’s power as limited, *Watchmen* tells audiences that police violence is necessary, noble, and justifiable; forwards a notion of justice rooted in state punitivity; and depicts white supremacy as fringe and exceptional.

Throughout the series, members of Tulsa's present-day police force brutalize individuals in acts portrayed as necessary and noble. Detective Abar, in particular, repeatedly abuses her power as an officer throughout the show, with the support of her law enforcement colleagues. For example, in the first episode, Detective Abar is called to assist with the interrogation of a suspected Seventh Kavalry member. After non-violent interrogation tactics prove ineffective, Abar is permitted—even encouraged, "he's not gonna talk, sans motivation"—to utilize violence.[40] Detective Abar brutally batters the suspect behind a closed door, as her colleagues, Chief Crawford, The Red Scare, and Looking Glass, listen stoically to the suspect's anguished yells and watch his blood seep under the door. This scene depicts such violence as normal, as well as justifiable, as Abar remarks before enacting it that "I've got a nose for white supremacy, and he smells like bleach," and "cop got shot, so we're all a little wound up here."[41]

Similarly, in episode two, Detective Abar participates in a raid of Nixonville—a community of Nixon supporters and Seventh Kavalry members in Tulsa—where she is encouraged to join her colleagues in brutalizing suspects. At first, Detective Abar is hesitant to support the impending violence, encouraging The Red Scare and her other colleagues to "stop and just take a breath" before raiding Nixonville. The Red Scare expresses surprise at her reaction, remarking: "You don't want to beat shit out of these fucks? You? She loves beating the shit out of these fucks." Looking Glass affirms this sentiment: "That much is indisputable." This dialogue suggests that violence is seen as a normal and justifiable operating procedure among Tulsa's police force, and behavior that its members not only encourage but enjoy.

Abar maintains her initial caution as The Red Scare carries out the raid; she merely observes as her colleagues tase, toss, and drag civilians, remarking that "this shit is unnecessary." However, a Nixonville resident's attempt to hit Looking Glass with a baseball bat prompts Detective Abar to participate in such "unnecessary" measures: she throws the resident to the ground and repeatedly punches him in the face until blood streams from his nose and mouth and he loses consciousness. Looking Glass silently observes her actions, which—against the backdrop of the violent raid—affirms the normalcy of violence among *Watchmen*'s law enforcement characters.

Additionally, through implying that Detective Abar is rewarded with god-like powers in the final episode—presumably to enact her vision of justice—*Watchmen* authenticates the possibility of "good cops." The show ends with the implication that Detective Abar has been granted Doctor Manhattan's godlike powers.[42] In the *Watchmen* universe, Doctor Manhattan is the only genuinely superpowered being—after a radioactive particle test accident, he became an omnipotent, omniscient, glowing, blue-skinned being.[43]

While Detective Abar has, in theory, been fighting a white supremacist organization as a member of the police force, she ultimately protects the white supremacist nation-state. If

the show's goal is to offer a critique of the relationship between white supremacy and policing, we ask, what does it mean to grant god-like powers to a character that we have repeatedly seen abuse her power to protect the state over people (no matter how vile those people are)? We argue that this validates a notion of justice rooted in the necessity of state punitivity and violence.

Further, through depicting the Seventh Kavalry's presence and power as limited, *Watchmen* fails to portray white supremacy as systemic. Throughout *Watchmen*, there is no evidence that the Seventh Kavalry exists or has influence outside Tulsa. While the show draws ties between the Ku Klux Klan, the Cyclops (another white supremacist organization that Will Reeves encountered in New York), and the Seventh Kavalry, each group is portrayed as bearing limited influence outside of their immediate town and timeframe. Additionally, it is revealed that the Seventh Kavalry have been unknowingly doing the bidding of a wealthy industrialist, Lady Trieu, who kills all of them in the process. The series then suggests that through destroying their small organization, the Seventh Kavalry's ideologies and influence have also been destroyed.

Additionally, through portraying select white supremacist police and politician characters in the present-day timeline as evil, exceptional infiltrators of otherwise "good" institutions, *Watchmen* fails to show that policing is a structurally white supremacist organization. For example, Judd Crawford's ties to the Ku Klux Klan are framed as "skeletons in his closet"—an idiom suggesting that his relationship to white supremacy is an exceptional secret that would jeopardize his standing in the force. When in fact, as shown by Cerise Castle's reporting on gangs in the Los Angeles Sheriff's department, the exact opposite is often true.[44] Indeed, when Detective Abar informs her colleagues about the KKK robes in Crawford's closet, they challenge the implication that Crawford is a white supremacist; thus, while violence and the abuse of power is treated as a standard policing procedure, the presence of white supremacists in the force is treated as unfathomable or the result of "rotten apples." Thus, *Watchmen* portrays white supremacy as fringe and exceptional rather than structural and systemic.

Ultimately, while *Watchmen* illuminates the historical relationship between white supremacy and US policing, it fails to show policing as a structurally white supremacist organization. By portraying central law enforcement characters enacting violence as heroes, depicting the main police character as an eventually almighty arbiter of justice, and setting up white supremacist law enforcement characters as "bad apples," the show reproduces conventions seen throughout the history of US copaganda.

Further, as with other historical examples of copaganda, *Watchmen* was created in collaboration with various members of law enforcement. Filmed in Atlanta, *Watchmen* employed a local law enforcement officer as a police coordinator on all nine episodes, and

featured a famous local police K-9 decorated for working with his owner, a Georgian police sergeant, "to solve crimes, ferret out evil, capture bad guys and save lives."[45] Additionally, one of *Watchmen's* writers was a former Chicago police officer whose experiences engaging in police work directly shaped the show's storytelling. As she shared, "I was a Black woman first and a police officer second. Having a badge didn't shield me from discrimination on and off the force. So there was a certain duality to my life that provided some insight into Angela Abar's character."[46] These experiences shaped both her individual approaches to writing and the writer's room more broadly. As another writer shared, this former officer "had these incredible stories that she would share with us about her experience in Chicago as a Black police officer, that I feel really, really helped us understand police violence and racial violence. And just hearing those stories, I think really helped me as a writer feel a part of the *Watchmen* world."[47]

Notably, this former officer left the force, in part because they no longer wanted to participate in "a system that oppressed people of color . . . At some point, I was just like, you know what, I can't do this anymore. I can no longer be a part of this system."[48] This writer's stance on policing is critical, but it does not appear to be abolitionist. As they shared on *The Official Watchmen Podcast*, while "Black people have always been the victims of institutional racism and police brutality. Us dying at the hands of police is nothing new. White supremacists have always been a part of law enforcement and are largely responsible for its toxic culture. I don't believe all police are bad."[49] Other *Watchmen* writers appear to hold similar stances, such as one writer who praised other fictional depictions of police that "highlight the mistakes in policing and the ways police can sometimes be 'the bad guys.'"[50] We see these politics play out in the show's propagation of a "bad apple" narrative of policing and portrayal of white supremacy as exceptional versus endemic in law enforcement.

The Future of Fictional Portrayals of Police on TV

As the Black Lives Matter movement amassed widespread global support in the summer of 2020, Hollywood's role in propagating dangerous ideologies about policing was subjected to increased intra-industry scrutiny. In June 2020, hundreds of actors, artists, authors, filmmakers, and executives collectively called on the US entertainment industry to examine and change its relationship with police forces and its production of copaganda. For example, on Juneteenth 2020, the Black Artists for Freedom collective issued an open letter and list of demands calling on "cultural institutions that depend on Black culture—publishing, writing, fashion, theater, film, television, visual arts, music, journalism, scholarship, education, social media—[to] commit to racial justice through material changes," including condemning and cutting ties with the police, hiring, supporting, and

advocating for Black people, and "imagin[ing] Black freedom." The letter and list amassed support from hundreds of signatories, including Ava DuVernay, John Legend, Sterling K. Brown, Lena Waithe, Tessa Thompson, and Lupita Nyong'o.[51]

Shortly after, Kendrick Sampson, Tessa Thompson, Patrisse Cullors, and Melina Abdullah penned and published a second letter—which was also signed by hundreds of Black entertainment industry artists and executives—declaring that "because Hollywood has been a huge part of the problem, we demand it be a part of the solution."[52] Specifically, Sampson et al. called on Hollywood to "divest from police" and invest in Black creators' careers and communities. Additionally, as stated in the opening of their letter, "Hollywood has a privilege as a creative industry to imagine and create. We have significant influence over culture and politics. We have the ability to use our influence to imagine and create a better world."[53] Yet, historically and currently, Hollywood encourages the epidemic of police violence and a culture of anti-Blackness. Thus, Sampson et al. called on Hollywood to not only divest from police and invest in Black lives, but to "divest from anti-black content" and "invest in anti-racist content."[54]

Other industry professionals—including those who have previously contributed to the production of copaganda—have since echoed this belief that Hollywood has the power and the responsibility to shift ideologies of police violence, support Black lives, and to "be a part of the solution." For example, Abel Ferrara, director of the 1992 police drama *Bad Lieutenant*, claimed, "'what does Hollywood have? We have the ability to create images and tell stories and shine a light. It's just standing up [against] what we all know is not correct.'"[55] And as Aaron Rahsaan Thomas—co-creator of *S.W.A.T.*—claimed, shifting Hollywood's narratives of the justice system is not a "creative burden, but a necessary responsibility."[56] We argue that the next step in this responsibility is to represent abolitionist futures and alternative realities.

As Alex Vitale details in his book, *The End of Policing*, reform—and diversity initiatives, in particular—are not viable answers to addressing structural police violence. This is because "American police function, despite whatever good intentions they have, as a tool for managing deeply entrenched inequalities in a way that systemically produces injustices for the poor, socially marginal, and nonwhite."[57] The historical relationship between policing and white supremacy is well-documented. The ongoing role and maintenance of white supremacy by US policing has most obviously been brought to light by the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as the work of Aisha Beliso-De Jesus, Geoff Ward, and Vida B. Johnson.[58] However, mass media engagement with the inextricable ties between white supremacy and policing is almost nonexistent. Perpetuating structures of copaganda, the media continues to portray the police as representatives and arbiters of justice. As Martinot and Sexton describe in their article "The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy," police violence

has been depicted as a banal "standard operating procedure."[59] This sense of banality is reproduced through the repetition of violence. We can see this through the police averaging around a thousand shootings a year;[60] shootings which—as the Black Lives Matter movement has made clear—disproportionately target Black, disabled, queer, and trans folk. Despite this, the media has refused to reckon with this relationship with few exceptions.

While subjected to increased public and intra-industry scrutiny,[61] US policing and Hollywood remain inextricably tied—police departments continue to fund Hollywood productions of copaganda, and Hollywood inspires recruiting tactics and justifies violence in police departments.[62] Racial justice organization Color of Change recommends that the media "commit to telling the truth about race in society, and telling the truth about the criminal justice system overall."[63]. We have come away from our research with a different conclusion.

Researchers have revealed that the US policing system is irreformable and have argued that to end white supremacy in the US, we must end the carceral state.[64] Thus, we propose that if Hollywood wishes to untangle itself from its carceral web, the media must portray narratives of police and prison abolition. Abolitionist organization Critical Resistance defines abolition as "a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment."[65] Additionally, abolitionists clarify that eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance requires more than closing prisons. It needs "the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society."[66] We thus understand abolition as both the negatory work of dismantling the violent systems and state structures we currently have, and the affirmative work of creating new systems and structures that Ruth Wilson Gilmore refers to as "life-affirming institutions."[67] Abolition has also been theorized as a "horizon,"[68] or, as Mathiesen calls it: "the unfinished."[69] Understanding abolition as a horizon removes a binary notion of failure and success from the project, we cannot fail or succeed at abolition, only continue working toward it.[70] Or, as argued by Angela Davis, in understanding abolition as a horizon, we must imagine and explore multiple strategies toward it. According to Davis, "the first step, then, would be to let go of the desire to discover one single alternative system."[71] We believe that presenting abolitionist narratives, media—and speculative fiction in particular—can play a huge role in exploring abolitionist strategies.

In their article, "Theorizing Ethnic and Racial Movements in the Global Age: Lessons from the Civil Rights Movement," Crystal Fleming and Aldon Morris discuss how technology has served as a force to "transform how activists organize, communicate, and advance their

agenda in the public sphere."[72] While their focus on television looks at how non-fiction programming has historically exposed US hypocrisy via live news, documentaries, and other content, their arguments highlight the influential role that mass media can play in activism and point to the potential for fictional media to shape social movements. After its adaptation to television, activists across the globe have donned the scarlet cloaks worn by handmaids in *The Handmaid's Tale*.[73] In 2010, Palestinian protestors dressed as Na'vi from the 2009 film *Avatar* during demonstrations against the Israeli-imposed West Bank barrier near the occupied village of Bilin.[74] As one protestor proclaimed, referencing an iconic line from the film, "We are here Avatars and Na'vis fighting against the sky people who are taking away our land, and occupying our people."[75] This relationship between cultural production and revolutionary change arguably has a long history in literature and music; as Toni Cade Bambara argued, the job of the culture worker "is to make revolution irresistible."[76]

The end of policing and prisons requires imagination, and creating new societies that don't rely on carceral systems involves creativity. Media narratives can "constrai[n] the imaginative boundaries of liberation," but they also have the capacity to expand those bounds.[77] Both speculative fiction and television have long been assumed to have "low cultural esteem." [78] The majority of these productions have been fiction, in part because the literary world allows for smaller, more niche audiences and low-budget production costs. However, often speculative fiction ends up adapted by film rather than television, given their "shared investment in spectacle."[79] We suspect the lack of abolitionist narratives in speculative fiction film is reflective of mainstream media companies' investment in maintaining the status quo.[80] While *Watchmen*, alongside other pieces of televised speculative fiction critiquing white supremacy, such as *Lovecraft Country* and *Westworld*, has been released in the past few years, we hope to see television explore the niche of abolitionist and activist futures soon. As noted by Walidah Imarisha, "All organizing is science fiction. Organizers and activists dedicate their lives to creating and envisioning another world, or many other worlds."[81] And as Mark Rifkin argues in *Fictions of Land and Flesh: Blackness, Indigeneity, Speculation,* speculative writing has long enabled the political imaginaries required to create "modes of analysis and visions for liberation/decolonization/abolition."[82]

We argue that it is time for mainstream media to take up this capacity to create "visions for liberation" in imagining speculative worlds on television, and we extend some potential starting points. The work of speculative fiction writers Akwaeke Emezi, Mariame Kaba, N. K. Jemisin, Kai Cheng Thom, Nnedi Okorafor, and Rivers Solomon have shaped our thinking about the necessary revolutionary process that abolition requires. For example, Akwaeke Emezi's *Pet*, a book aimed at middle-schoolers, follows the story of 15-year old Jam, a young Black, a selectively mute trans girl who lives in Lucille,a city run by angels and free of

monsters. Jam accidentally conjures a monstrous creature from her mother's art one evening—the titular 'Pet'. However, readers learn that this creature—however monstrous—has arrived to do the work of angels; it is there to hunt a monster in Lucille. This monster turns out to be Jam's best friend's uncle, who has been sexually abusing his nephew. While deeply entrenched in fantastical elements, *Pet* raises questions about how harm is enacted and what safety looks like in a post-abolitionist utopia, and what happens "when you think you've been without monsters for so long, sometimes you forget what they look like."[83]

Another work of abolitionist fiction that could inform future film and television productions is "Justice," a nine-page short story written by Mariame Kaba and illustrated by Bianca Diaz. In "Justice," readers are introduced to a sixteen-year-old protagonist named Adila, who lived in Small Place (SP) and was recently murdered by an out-of-town visitor from Earth. The Earth Visitor kills Adila because she cannot believe that there are no prisons in SP. There are no prisons or jails because, in the SP, there is no such thing as bad people, only people who do bad things; thus, SP's leadership focuses on repairing harm rather than punishing people. Additionally, the SP is a place where mothers can be men, fathers can have no gender, and gender does not affect anyone's likelihood of experiencing harm. In SP, there are peace holders whose responsibility is "to make sure that all of our conflicts are swiftly and peacefully addressed."[84] In SP, harm is understood as an act against the community, not an individual; thus, all issues are addressed in community circles. Moreover, there is no such thing as private property in SP, and basic needs (including shelter, health care, and education) are guaranteed for all. That Kaba can create such a a powerful, imaginative vision of a future life, providing many (though of course, not all) of the answers to what a world without prisons could look like in nine pages is impressive, and calls us to ask what she could do with more time and resources. Kaba's story ends with the SP community spending weeks celebrating Adila's life and requiring the Earth Visitor to partake in the celebrations before Adila's family chooses between letting the Earth Visitor die or having her take Adila's place in the community. They choose the latter.When faced with the concept of abolition, many individuals initially respond with questions such as "what about the murderers? What about the rapists?"[85] We believe that through drawing inspiration from the work of Kaba, Emezi, and other speculative fiction writers, film and television creators have the opportunity to address such questions and to craft content that supports the Movement for Black Lives. For example, what if HBO's *Watchmen* depicted Detective Abar recognizing the harms imposed by herself and her law enforcement colleagues—reflecting the narrative of one of its own writers— and using her newfound superpowers to crumble prisons and police precincts? What if other fictional television shows with law enforcement characters presented quitting the force as the best thing a police officer can do? It is through crafting abolitionist endings such as these that Hollywood creatives can help audiences envision the possibilities of an abolitionist world and embrace their responsibility to "make revolution irresistible."[86]

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Article details

Jessica Hatrick, Olivia González, "*Watchmen*, Copaganda, and Abolition Futurities in US Television," *Lateral* 11.2 (2022).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L11.2.2

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053